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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S JANUARY 29 MEETING WITH EDUCATION MINISTER HISHAMMUDDIN

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher J. LaFleur for
reasons 1.4 (b and d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Education Minister and UMNO Youth chief Hishammuddin responded favorably to the Ambassador's call to expand dialogue between the Embassy and Muslim Malay youth during their January 29 meeting. Hishammuddin described the Malaysian political scene as "volatile" due to the increased racial divide and Malay insecurity over their relative economic status and the role of Islam. Malay youth would continue to vent their emotions publicly, as they did during the 2006 UMNO General Assembly, but those on the receiving end, whether ethnic Chinese or the U.S. Government, should look beyond the rhetoric to the bigger and longer term picture. In any event, the Malaysian Government would never allow anti-U.S. sentiment to get out of hand. Hishammuddin strongly endorsed the U.S. English language assistant program and hoped that this could be expanded nationwide. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by polchief, called on Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, Malaysia's Education Minister and head of the UMNO party's youth wing, on January 29 and explored opportunities for expanded dialogue with the influential UMNO Youth. The Ambassador explained our interest in conveying the U.S. perspective on issues of common concern, while acknowledging that U.S. and Muslim Malay views will differ on some important topics, like aspects of Middle East policy. UMNO constituents and the U.S.-Malaysia relationship would benefit from direct information from the U.S. Embassy, rather than relying on sometimes inaccurate media reports. Hishammuddin, accompanied by UMNO Youth Secretary General Abdul Rahman Datuk Hj. Dahlan and his personal Ministry senior staff, welcomed the Ambassador's call for expanded dialogue. The Embassy and UMNO Youth would need to determine appropriate topics to address given UMNO Youth's sensitivity and "immaturity," avoiding, for example, the Middle East, but perhaps addressing the subject of Islam in some fashion.

¶3. (C) Hishammuddin described the Malaysian political scene as "volatile beneath the surface." The Minister, assuming a friendly and frank manner, went on to explain, "this is a difficult period for the psyche of the Malays, particularly because there is uncertainty about the role of Islam." In the context of rapid development, the Malays had doubts about the foundation of their own country. The country's "racial splits are now more pronounced," and Malays still do not feel on par with other races. At times, the Malay youth became overly emotional regarding matters of race and religion, and needed to "release pressure," as they did during the November 2006 UMNO General Assembly (which featured heated racial rhetoric that was broadcast on national television).

Naturally, there would be a reaction to such venting. In the case of the UMNO General Assembly, it was a shame, Hishammuddin added, that the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA, UMNO's partner in the coalition government) had not been strong enough to manage the reaction. As a result, Hishammuddin admitted that UMNO still would not allow him to carry out public activities in ethnic Chinese areas. The Minister confided that, in the wake of the controversial UMNO General Assembly, Prime Minister Abdullah had acknowledged his decision to allow a live, national television broadcast of the event as his worst decision in 2006.

¶4. (C) Hishammuddin argued that MCA and other non-Malay political partners needed to understand the emotional background behind Malay frustration and look beyond the heated words. The Malay relationship with the U.S. featured "the same dynamic," and from time to time the U.S. would be the object of emotional public criticism. "This will never get out of hand, the government will not allow it," Hishammuddin assured the Ambassador, but the U.S. would need to adopt a long-term view similar to that of UMNO's national coalition partners.

¶5. (C) On the subject of Islam, Hishammuddin said, "the moderates don't speak out" and described Prime Minister Abdullah's "Islam Hadari" concept as an attempt to provide a useful platform for moderates. While most Malays were not extreme in their views of Islam, "if you push us, we have no other choice," and the younger generation will begin to look to "tyrants" like Saddam Hussein as role models.

¶6. (U) The Ambassador raised the U.S. English Language Assistant program, now in its second year with some 13 American assistants and one English Teaching Fellow deployed in the state of Terengganu. The Education Minister applauded this program and said he would like to expand it into a national effort, coordinated through his office. The focus should remain on assistance and training of Malaysian English language teachers. Hishammuddin said he fully supported increased exchanges between Malaysians and Americans at all levels, and he particularly valued the International Visitor Program.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Hishammuddin, the son of Malaysia's third Prime Minister, Hussein Onn, has the pedigree as well as the personal standing to be a future prime minister. He is now punching important tickets on the way to that goal by holding down the Education and UMNO Youth jobs. Hishammuddin is reported to be a strong Abdullah supporter and a key political ally of the Prime Minister's son-in-law and Deputy Youth Chief, Khairy Jamaluddin. If and how Hishamuddin and Khairy will reconcile their prime ministerial ambitions remains to be seen. We welcome the opportunity to interact more with UMNO Youth, which continues to brandish the banner of Malay nationalism and remains highly critical of the U.S. We intend to follow-up strongly on the English teaching program. We welcomed the opportunity to meet with Hishammuddin, who, like his other cabinet colleagues, is not always easy to pin down.

LAFLEUR